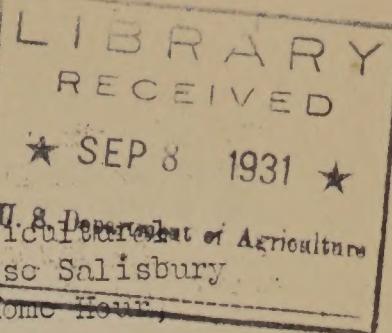


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WHAT IS IT?



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New and fancy fruits finding their way these days on to the counters of our fancy fruit stores, often cause the customer to exclaim "What is it?"

Many of these "What is it's" come from our own subtropic climes in Florida and California; others from our West Indian neighbors. With Porto Rico and the Virgin Islands brought close to our markets by airplane, practically all the best tropical fruits should eventually be grown on American territory and made available to our fruit connoisseurs. Since we have no Californians or Floridans here just now, we refer that "what is it?" question to Mr. T. R. Robinson of the Division of Horticultural Crops and Diseases in the Bureau of Plant Industry. Mr. Robinson, I guess most of us know the mango by name, but probably not much else about it. Will you start off with some facts about the mango?

Mr. Robinson: The mango, often called the "King of Fruits," perhaps takes the lead among tropical fruits. The fruit of the best varieties most nearly reminds one of a largo, somewhat flattened, very tender and juicy peach, but with a fragrance and spicy flavor not to be found in any other fruit. Common seedlings are generally too strong with a turpentine flavor and contain too much fiber attached to the seed to be relished by the uninitiated, but only the improved varieties free from fiber are usually sent to the northern markets. The mango stands little cold and can be grown only in the warmer portions of Florida. The fruit usually matures from June to August. For serving, it is peeled and sliced and, like a peach, must be consumed within about a week from the time of picking. This means careful handling and fast transportation, with customers ready to take the fruit promptly on arrival.

Mr. Salisbury: The Papaya is another of the tropical fruits with which we're not very well acquainted, Mr. Robinson. What is it like and how do you eat it?

Mr. Robinson: The Papaya, often called "Pawpaw" or "Troc Melon," is one of the most spectacular fruits of the tropics. The fruits resemble large, elongated cantaloupes, growing in clusters attached to the trunk of a small treo, often several dozen to a treo. These fruits ripen in succession, beginning with the lower tier of fruits. They are commonly served in much the same manner as cantaloupes--either as a breakfast fruit or as a salad or dessert. Some people even eat the small black seeds which supply a peppery flavor. The addition of a little salt and lemon or lime juice is usually found agreeable. The papaya is remarkable for its content of a powerful digestive ferment, "papain," similar in its action to pepsin, and the fruit is greatly prized as an aid to digestion. The Papaya is easily injured by cold, but is

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grown in the warmer portions of Florida, South Texas and California, and occasionally shipped to northern markets from Florida.

Mr. Salisbury: Now, we'll appreciate some information, Mr. Robinson, about the Avocado or, as we used to call it, the "Alligator Pear."

Mr. Robinson: The avocado is no longer a novelty. Both California and Florida now supply this rich, buttery fruit almost the year 'round, and no longer at luxury prices. It is another of America's native fruits, and in food value is in a class by itself. This is because of its oil content, which far exceeds that of any other fresh fruit. The varieties shipped to our principal markets are usually green, pear-shaped, and weigh about a pound. They should not be eaten until they are beginning to feel soft to the touch, though not mushy. Large fruits are usually served as a salad, sliced, after peeling and removing the single seed. With smaller fruits, simply cut in two lengthwise and place lemon juice and salt in the seed cavity. Then scoop out the soft pulp with a spoon. The avocado tree is somewhat more tender than the orange, and the crop is easily injured by wind, so that the avocado is not likely to be grown on such an extensive scale as to compete seriously with the other fruits of this country.

Mr. Salisbury: Some of the fruits you have told me about, Mr. Robinson, are absolutely strangers to me. I believe you mentioned the cherimoya, sapota and sapodilla? Does the cherimoya look as odd as its name sounds?

Mr. Robinson: Just about. But its rough, warty, exterior conceals a delicate custard-like pulp, white and aromatic. It is usually eaten fresh. Most people consider it very refreshing.

Mr. Salisbury: Where is it grown?

Mr. Robinson: In California and Florida. Some of its close relatives, such as the sugar apple, sour sop, and bullock's-heart, are much more tender than the cherimoya but are occasionally found fruiting in Florida.

Mr. Salisbury: What about the sapota? Is it the same as the "Maney sapota" that's sold in Havana, Cuba?

Mr. Robinson: Not the one I mentioned. The "Maney sapota" is probably too tender to be grown commercially in the United States. However, there are many varieties going under the general name of "Sapota." The one to which I referred is the so-called "white sapota." It is fairly hardy and is receiving considerable attention as a new fruit prospect in California and Florida. The fruits are about the size of a tomato, yellowish or green in color, with soft and very sweet flesh in the better varieties. The fruit from unselected seedlings is often rather bitter, but the propagation of selected varieties promises soon to make available dependable fruit free from objectionable features.

Mr. Salisbury: How about the sapodilla?

Mr. Robinson: It's related to the spots we've been talking about. The sapodilla is a remarkable tree. It serves three distinct purposes. It produces an edible fruit. The latex derived from the bark is the basis of the "chicle" of commerce from which is prepared that potent aid to American happiness--chewing gum! Sapodilla wood is very durable. In addition, the tree with its thick glossy green leaves makes a good ornamental. Now about the fruits: It resembles a small russet apple, and tastes somewhat like a pear sweetened with brown sugar. The granular flesh completes this resemblance to a brown sugar mixture. While the tree is tender, it is grown in the warmer parts of Florida and the fruit keeps well enough to permit shipment to northern markets.

Mr. Salisbury: Are any of the subtropical fruits adapted for growing over a considerable portion of the warmer parts of the United States?

Mr. Robinson: Yes, the Oriental or Japanese persimmon is one of these. The name persimmon generally calls to mind, sometimes painfully, the small puckery fruits which grow wild in our woodlots in the southeastern portion of the United States. The Oriental persimmon, a much larger fruit, is considered by many Japanese as their best native fruit. Some varieties produce fruit as large as a large orange, without pucker or tannin when ripe, and usually brilliantly colored. The pulp in some varieties is so soft, sweet and melting as to suggest a rich marmalade made of peach and apricot; other varieties have flesh crisp like an apple. The tree is fairly hardy, thriving throughout the Gulf Coast States and in California, so that the smooth, handsome fruits are becoming fairly common visitors to our markets in the fall months and deserve a larger share of our attention. The fruit of the soft varieties is peeled and eaten with a spoon, either as a breakfast fruit or as a dessert. The addition of cream makes an excellent combination.

Mr. Salisbury: Are there still other tropical fruits that we are likely to run across in our markets?

Mr. Robinson: Yes, the number of these tropical novelties is much too great to permit their discussion in a brief interview. Their very names, however, seem to have romantic interest. Mentioning only a few may bring to some listener's mind a recollection of a happy moment, or perhaps a moment not so happy, when tasting for the first time a fruit such as the mangosteen, or the durian, the caraman, the canistel, the loquat, the feijoa, the Surinan cherry, the grumichana, the Natal plum, the carambola, the jaboticaba, the granadilla, the pomegranate, or the lychee. Enough have been mentioned perhaps to indicate the almost infinite variety of these exotic products that await our attention as an inquisitive people, always ready for a new thrill.

